

Promising Practice: Smart Start Program

Bergen Community College

Northern New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC)

Recipients of the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG), funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance, know that each state requires a percentage of its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients to participate in specific activities for a minimum number of hours per week. These activities are categorized as essential, or "core," and secondary, or "non-core." While the core activity requirements help emphasize work, some TANF recipients see them as being irrelevant to their career objectives and delaying their entry into the workforce. In New Jersey, for instance, TANF recipients interested in pursuing training in healthcare may first be required to participate in community service, regardless of whether this service is healthcare related. Recognizing this issue, Bergen Community College (BCC), the lead member of the Northern New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC), initiated a "Smart Start" program which offers TANF recipients an introductory course in healthcare that also counts toward their core activity requirements.

Launching this Smart Start program began with the NNJHPC leadership team exploring the feasibility of using a residential "boot camp" model, a strategy that is being employed by a number of HPOG grantees. NNJHPC invited representatives from one such grantee, the South Carolina Department of Social Services, to share that program's boot camp strategies and experiences at a consortium-wide summit. Following this event, the ACF Regional TANF Program Manager coordinated a meeting with representatives from the New Jersey Division of Family Development (the state's TANF agency), New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, local Workforce Investment Board, and local One-Stop Career Center to discuss the possibility of adding a pre-training program that could help fulfill TANF requirements. By bringing these players to the table, the Consortium helped achieve buy-in and strengthen community partnerships. The end result: the BCC Smart Start curriculum was approved by BCC's local One-Stop and saw its first enrollments in September 2012.

A TANF recipient's first step toward enrolling in the Smart Start program occurs at the local Board of Social Services. On or about the first of each month, the Board refers TANF recipients to the Bergen County One-Stop to participate in G-Job, the One-Stop's WorkFirst job readiness program. During G-Job, clients receive a general orientation to the job search program and complete a battery of assessment activities. They are then presented with career options, and those who are qualified and interested are encouraged to apply to BCC's HPOG program. If accepted, these clients begin the Smart Start program on or about the first of the next month (up to 30 days after their initial referral to the One-Stop).

In its current form, Bergen's Smart Start program runs five days a week for four weeks, and attendance for the entire program is mandatory. An experienced nurse-educator hired by BCC specifically for the Smart Start program is responsible for the course and is the primary instructor, but approximately five visiting lecturers also lead courses during the four-week

period. Smart Start students participate in both a cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certification and a first aid class which are taught by an additional pair of instructors.

The Smart Start curriculum provides an orientation to health career pathways and meets those work participation requirements placed on TANF recipients. As a result, clients who go through Smart Start are deemed to have fulfilled their community work experience (C-WEP) requirements and can directly enter training at the conclusion of Smart Start.

Uniformly, clients who complete Smart Start rave about the course and the month-long experience. They find themselves better prepared to begin their chosen vocational training and feel that the time has been well spent. To date, 98% of the 36 Smart Start clients have passed all of their occupational certifying or licensing exams, a significant performance improvement from Bergen's previous record. NNJHPC leadership expects that at least three other colleges in the consortium will adopt the curriculum this year.

When asked what they would recommend to other grantees considering programs similar to Smart Start, Bergen's leadership point to the importance of achieving buy-in from local faculty and One-Stop leadership during the course development process. They also acknowledge the value of hearing from the South Carolina Department of Social Services, and they welcome a visit from any HPOG grantee that would like to see NNJHPC's "nonresidential boot camp" in action.

HPOG Promising Practices: Innovative Use of Technology
Bergen Community College, Northern New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC)

Bergen Community College is the lead member of the Northern New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC), a group of 10 county community colleges working to train TANF and other low-income participants in healthcare occupations. The consortium's large geographic area makes it difficult for the 10 site coordinators to coordinate in person and also makes it challenging to disseminate important information to partners and students. NNJHPC has leveraged technology to address these issues, creating a public consortium website and an internal LinkedIn group.

The NNJHPC website (www.nnjhp.com), built using Microsoft's Sharepoint platform, allows the consortium to communicate with partners, employers, and current students. Information available includes health professions course descriptions, links to industry associations and career exploration sites, links to each county's One-Stop Career Center and Workforce Investment Board, and job opportunity listings from the consortium's employer partners. The site also offers subscription capabilities through Constant Contact, ensuring that consortium stakeholders receive the latest news and information. The website is fast becoming a means to provide partners with immediate access to relevant materials and updates.

For its internal communication, NNJHPC has established a forum Group through LinkedIn. LinkedIn Groups allow members to create or comment on discussions posts, providing a means for knowledge sharing and group problem solving. Membership in this Group is limited to grant leadership and the individual leaders at each of the 10 member colleges. The Group is restricted, or private, so members feel free to openly communicate with their peers. Consortium director Justin Doheny reports that members have thus far used the Group to request assistance and ideas from other Consortium leaders, and that they view it as a helpful addition to the various communication channels available within the NNJHPC.

For other HPOG grantees considering the use of Internet tools for communication or information sharing, Mr. Doheny recommends choosing a platform that's easy to design and easy to use. He points to the LinkedIn platform as an example of highly accessible software. Indeed, many of the site coordinators already had an account prior to the creation of the LinkedIn group. Mr. Doheny also encourages other grantees to make their Internet tools and sites look professional and suggests that grantees use the talents of their organization's Web designer, if possible. A site that is easily updated is also crucial, as effective information sharing requires frequent posts and uploads. To facilitate and encourage internal communication, Mr. Doheny suggests that project directors consider restricting access to Internet sites or groups by making them private.